DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 020 SP 036 734

AUTHOR Ronnerman, Karin
TITLE Action Research as In-service Project To Help Teachers Validate Their Own Teaching Practice.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
AVAILABLE FROM Karin Ronnerman, Univerity Trollhattan Uddevalla, Department of Education and Humanities, Box 1240, S-462 28 Vannersborg, Sweden ($10).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; Decentralization; Educational Change; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; *Faculty Development; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Inservice Teacher Education; Models; *Teacher Improvement; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Sweden; *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

Local responsibility for school development in Sweden has led to new possibilities for teacher improvement. This paper looks at using the potential of action research generated by the decentralization for the inservice training of teachers. Decentralization offered opportunities for inservice development work through special funding for projects, the opportunity for teachers to take responsibility for their own inservice training, and increased teacher cooperation. A 2-year project served as a model for using action research for inservice teacher training. The project had two main themes: local development work is an essential part of school development, and inservice training should focus on the teachers' own situation, not on a general teaching method. Through a series of seminars, researchers helped teachers define their field of interest and formulate their research problem, and then offered guidance to the teachers as their projects proceeded. During the second year, a symposium was held at which the teachers presented the results of their research to other teachers. The seminar series provided help and support throughout the process. (ND)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 397 020

Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of AERA (American Educational Research Association), New York, april, 7-12, 1996

Action Research as In-service Project to help Teachers Validate their own Teaching Practice.

Karin Rönnerman
University of Trollhattan/Uddevalla, Department of Education and Humanities, Box 1240, S-462 28 Vanersborg.
e-mail: ronnerman@vbg.htu.se

Introduction

In Sweden the decentralisation of the School system started in the seventies and today, with the new curriculum (Lpo-94), we have a school governed by nationally stated aims and results, but it is the elected politicians in the municipalities and the head teacher at each school who are responsible for the school develoment. Kallós and Nilsson (1995, p1) identifies four periods in the development of the comprehensive school. The first period they identify as a quantitative expension during the sixties and early seventies, the second is regarded as an intermediate phase appearing in the late seventies, the third concerns a shift in governance of the school system beginning in the eighties and the fourth is identified as market-orientation and free choice from neo-liberal ideas. In this paper I want to focus on the in-service training for teachers and the possibilities of action research which decentralisation of the school system may create. As a background I will use the periods identified by Kallo´s and Nilsson (1995) but emphasizing the role of the researcher in each phase. I will end the paper by focusing on contradictions (tension) appearing in doing in-service training as action research.

During the centralized period (phase one and two) of the Swedish education system research was used to create "good models" for teaching in order to achieve the national goals. The models could be based on reading achievement, working in groups, etc. The National Board of Education used these models in a rational way based on the idea that there was only one solution to reach a particular goal.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K Rönnerman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Through the centralized in-service training for teachers these models were distributed among Swedish teachers in the belief that, through a special type of teaching, the school would achieve the national goals and a school offering equal opportunities.

In the third period a new system for in-service training for teachers and local school development was introduced whereby municipalities and schools gained greater influence in these matters. A certain amount of money was marked for in-service training and the local education committee in the municipalities was responsible for how the money was used in the schools. About 40% should be used for local development work and the teachers could apply for money by sending a project-plan to the local education committee. A year later, in the spring of 1983, the Swedish Parliment (Riksdag) granted special funds for development work at the primary level of the compulsory school (The Primary Level Development Scheme). This special grant was about 30 million SEK per annum over a four-year period ending in the 1986/87 fiscal year. For the next two years special funds were given to the intermediate level and after that to the upper level of the compulsury school. The main purpose for both these fundings was to integrate in-service training with the local development work but there was hardly any connection to research or researchers in the schools. The development work was very much influenced by specific ideas of what was good for children in their process of learning. For example it was very popular to let the children have physical activities now and then during a lecture in mathematics. There was a slogan leading this work which said: *if you move your body you will get ithe hang of it into your head.*

During the fourth period the decentralisation of the school-system has gone even further. A new national curriculum was implemented in July 1995, which is goal- and result-oriented. It does not include any centralized regulations for teaching. Instead it is stated that the teachers are free to choose their teaching methods to achieve the national goals. During this period the government pointed out that the Universities should be responsible for giving in-sevice training for the needs in the school system. One motivation for this was to latch on to the educational research and development work that was being done at the universities. Each school or municipality can ask for the kind of in-service training they need for developing their school. The other way around is that the universities can offer special courses for school development. This means there is no longer any centralised ideas concerning in-service training but on the other hand there is no longer any money

earmarked for in-service training for teachers or local development work in the municipalities. Today it is the head teacher of each school who gets money for running the school and he has to make priorities in the budget for in-service training or development work.

Although it can be said that today there are no restrictions about finding new ways of in-service training and that it may just be lack of imagination that limits the teachers´ influence over their own development and added competence, it cannot be denied that teachers still work in a bureaucratic organisation. Today one can say there are two main concepts that govern schooldevelopment and they are: evaluation and professional development. In the Bill from 1990/91 concerning the responsibility of the schools, one can read:

> *"I see a greater sense of responsibility as necessary while it is my conviction that the impetus in school development will now have to be looked for in the classrooms and the individual school. It is the teachers and the principals professionalism that has to be taken drawn on."* (Prop 1990/91:18, s18, translated by the author)

For decades teachers have been trained to believe that the solutions, focusing on teaching methods, come from above (central decisions). With the new curriculum there will no longer be any ready-made solutions. The schools are presupposed to develop their own solutions for school-development and teachers will have to find teaching methods that interact with the children´s need to learn and this cannot be done through general teaching methods. Instead the focus has to be on the problem in the classroom. A logical concequence will be that the teachers are not only to be seen as a consumer but as a producer of knowledge. This means there are claims on developing a new culture - a learning organisation where the teachers development of knowledge will be in the centre of school development.

Let me now introduce you to Anna and Ester, who are two of the teachers I am working with, and a conversation I had with them to exemplify how they are thinking (I will come back to their work throughout the paper).

Two teachers, Anna and Ester, teaching at the primary level in a class where seven, eight and nine years old are mixed. Anna and Ester had got funds from the local educational board to start development work in mathematics.
-They can´t agree upon which model to choose the Montessori beads or the material from Henry Plucrose. Both are expensive so they have to decide on one of them. This way of tackling a problem is very common among Swedish teachers, and they have been fed with solutions from different in-service companies whose aim is to provide the teachers with *the* method. My response to the teachers was firstly to emphasize that neither the Montessori beads nor the Pluckrose material would solve any of their problems when they don´t know how to use the material and are not familiar with the philosophy behind it. Secondly, I asked the teachers to think about their problem in the classroom. After a discussion which lasted for about an hour and a half Anna and Ester came to this conclusion.
- They would wait to use the money and would start the development work with a description of what they actually do in mathematics. When we had this discussion together it was obvious that the problem for Anna and Ester was not choosing a new method but developing what they were doing for the younger children so it would be interesting for the nine year old children.

Is development work a good way of in-service training?

The special funding for development work on the primary level, earlier mentioned, was evaluated during the ongoing period. One part of the evaluation was on the local level where eight schools were selected and followed for one year and a follow-up was made three years later (Rönnerman, 1993). The study shows that the Primary Level Development Scheme per se did not initiate the development activities in the schools, nor did the activities come to an end when the funding ceased. In most schools, the teachers had already come together and started discussions about their situation. The Primary Level Development Scheme enabled the teachers to implement their plans. Once the activities have started, the teachers will try to find ways to keep the project going. In five schools, the teachers have continued to work in tune with the new ideas, in one school there was limited activity, in one school the teachers started a new development project with other ideas, and in one school the teachers applied for money to continue the activity with a different perspective.

Karin Rönnerman: Action Research as In-service project to help Teachers Validate their own Teaching Practice. AERA, new York, 1996.

Whether or not the teachers go on with their projects seems to be due to the inner logic of the activity, where some factors seem to be of particular importance. One such factor is the teachers' need of support for their activities. Those in charge of the projects at the county school board seem to be crucial here, and the teachers certainly need their encouragement and support. But the teachers need recognition from their headteachers as well. The teachers want the headteacher to visit the classrooms and look at the activities rather than just talk about the project with other headteachers or the local education comittee. The teachers want to be seen.

A second factor is the teachers' chances of influencing the decisions concerning in-service training. The study shows that the teachers take responsibility for their own in-service training by inviting renowned experts to the school, by organizing their own courses or by studying relevant literature. After such events, the teachers discuss how they can use their new knowledge to change their pedagogical practices and try new methods in the classroom.

A third factor is how the teachers cooperate with each other. The work requires cooperation among the primary-school teachers but also with teachers of practical and artistic subjects such as music, art, and drama. In some projects there was cooperation also between teachers at the pre-school level and primary level. Today, cooperation seems to be a key concept for development, and all the teachers in the study appreciate this effect of the development work. They can now talk openly in the staff room about problem pupils and things that may happen in the classrooms. The study shows that it is possible to go beyond the division of labour in the school system. It is possible to work alone but it is also possible to work together.
The project activities have had impact on both the classrooms activities and the teachers. In each of the the eight projects, the teachers have been trying to work with the individual child on its own level of achievement, and to integrate the subjects as much as possible. This is shown in the way the pupils draw up their own weekly plans, how some pupils with concentration difficulties are given special training in music, drama, art, and stimulation of their motor function, creativity and linguistic development. Doing this, the teachers have tried to integrate the various subjects, and the remedial teacher seems to have a central function. She is in charge of planning the activities together with the other teachers, and of organizing the pupils in different groups in her teaching. This can be seen as a covert criticism of the prevailing division of labour in the school system, but also as a wish to integrate the various subjects in the educational context.

Development work during the eighties was funded by ear-marked money and the teachers used the money to try new teaching methods in the classroom or to organize the work differently. For example it was popular to start classes at the primary level with mixed ages. There was hardly any connection to educational research in the individual project. That meant the teachers were left alone with their ideas and at this time you can see it was the method which governed in which direction school development turned. The new requirements with professional teachers will need an in-service training that is based on the following ideas: it is connected to educational research, it is critical to *the* solution, it can develop exchange between closeness and distance, it will develop teacher research, it will develop knowledge production governed by teachers and will develop contacts with the local school.

In-service training and Educational Research

The effect of the decentralisation of the allocation of resources including in-service training and new regulations from the Ministry of Education requiring in-service training to be carried out by Universities made us start an experimental project aimed at finding new ways of in-service training which took into account teachers´knowledge and experience.

In Umeå we tried a way of in-service training where equal responsibility was given to the researchers and the teachers (see Rönnerman, 1995, 1996 and Åsemar, 1995). An informal group consisting of representatives from the Department of Education in Umeå, the Board of Teacher Education and Research, school development leaders in two municipalities and the National Agency for Education discussed questions about how it would be possible to bring research to teachers and how it could be adopted for use in the classroom. At the same time there were discussions among some researchers at the Department of Education in Umeå focusing on teacher reflection and action in the classroom. The result was a project located at the Department of Education and with financial support from the Board of Teacher Education and Research and the National Agency for Education (See Åsemar, 1995). The project called "Teacher research their own teaching" was initiated in 1993 in cooperation with two local municipalities from which teachers

were invited to attend a series of seminars focusing on school-development in relation to the needs of teachers.

In this project the aim was to include the experiences from the eighties concerning local development work. The project was based on two main ideas:
a) local development work as an essential part of school development and
b) in-service training focused on the teachers´ own problems and not on *the* teaching method.

The project emphasizes that the teachers should regain control over their own in-service training and let the problem, not the method, guide the development. These starting-points imply that this in-service training for teachers must be planned in a long-term perspective, the work must be carried out jointly by researchers and teachers and the development work should be based on the teachers´, and not the researchers´, problem.

During the autumn semester of 1993 a project was introduced in the form of a series of seminars where the researchers have mainly acted as supervisors. As supervisors we have in different ways tried to develop the teachers´ ideas by suggesting relevant research articles on topical issues. These seminars should be regarded as an attempt to find new ways of in-service training for teachers leading to greater knowledge of their own teaching - knowledge that might be useful for the teachers´ development of their own style and method of teaching.

In agreement with the municipalities the seminars were to be held five times during one single year. The days planned for these seminars were divided into morning classes and afternoon classes. In the morning we (the researchers) used the classes for lectures, literature seminars, information-retrieval and discussions about the teachers´ homework. The homework consisted of performing observations in their own classroom. We used the model that Ely et al (1993) present in their book. The main idea is to observe, memorise and, afterwards, document what you have seen. The teachers made the first observations in groups at the university. Afterwards they discussed them in their own group, for example what each member had seen, why they had seen different things etc. The second opportunity for observations was in their own classroom. They decided what they wanted to observe and memorise and afterwards they documented it. On the following morning they presented their observations to each other and exchanged experiences.

During the afternoon classes the teachers were divided into three groups. One researcher joined each group as a supervisor. In these groups the discussions centred on the exchange of experiences and on the teachers selecting the problems for the development of their teaching. The researchers´ task during these afternoon classes was to help the teachers to define their fields of interest and to formulate a problem for their future development work. This guidance was an ongoing process with discussions about what to do and how to do it. At the fifth and final seminar the teachers were supposed to present a plan for their development work. This plan was expected to provide answers to the questions as to *why* they wanted to take up this particular development work, *what* they wanted to develop and *how* they wanted to do it in the classroom. I will now give you a picture of Karen, the handicraft teacher in the school and how she started her development work by identifying a problem in her classroom.

Karen teaches all the children in the school, and they start with handicraft work in grade three at the primary level. Karen had a problem in her teaching because she discovered that children today use finger-mobility less than before (shoe-laces have been replaced by burdock-strip; normal watches by digital ones; buttons in jackets by zippers). When one teacher in grade one asked Karen for help in training the children to make different decorations for Christmas and Easter she asked herself the following question: I have to make a choice whether I should lower my teaching level in grade three or take this task seriously and develop tasks which aim at better finger-mobility among the children. She started her project with clearly defined aims such as: finding teaching methods for training children´s finger-mobility; letting the children become familiar with different materials and methods; teaching the children to do a job by following instructions; giving the children opportunities to cooperate.

Karens decision of letting her problem lead her into the project means that she will have great help from this project in her own teaching when she meets the children in grade three. She does not have to lower the ability level in handicraft in grade three thanks to her consious choise to let the problem in the classroom lead her into the development work.

After this first year with the five seminars we decided to go on for another year with the same group of teachers but this time without seminars. The teachers were

instead expected to carry out and document their development work. The researchers were responsible for the same group of teachers as before and visited them in their schools and discussed their work. We also helped the teachers to structure their reports. During this phase we tested other patterns than the R&D model. One was to write a letter to a colleague, another was to use the concept of conditions - process - results as a guide-line for writing the report. Our main interest was to get the teachers to write with confidence.

At the end of the second year a teacher symposium was arranged. The purpose was to bring the process to a close and to let the teachers present their work to other teachers. Teachers who had completed their first year and headteachers from all the schools cooperating were invited to this one-day symposium. The teachers presentations were supported by short contributions from representatives from the Department of Education in Umeå, the Board of Teacher Training and Research in Umeå, the National Agency of Education and development leaders from the cooperating municipalities. Each teacher was allowed about 30 minutes for the presentation and subsequent discussion. There were parallell seminars, and other teachers could choose which session they wanted to attend.

Teachers validating their own teaching practice

The model of in-service training we used was very successful and the teachers were pleased with their work. The teachers defined a problem existing in their classrooms to be a sarting point of a development work. Through the afternoon-classes in the seminar serie each teacher had a place where they could discuss their problem with other teachers and a researcher. Through these discussion the teacher got "help" in planning how to go through with the work by other teachers experiences and the researchers supervising. Let´s go back to Anna and Ester and see what they learned from their development work when they chose to do something that was connected to their teaching practice.

After our discussion Anna and Ester decided to make a description of what they did in mathematics in the classroom. They would observe individual pupils to see how they were getting on. Their work consisted of laborative mathematics which Anna and Ester described as mathematics where the pupils are active and work independently. They made up a plan consisting of ten different tasks which each

child was to work with individually. This should be seen as a complement to the ordinary book in mathematics. All the pupils worked once a week with the individual plan and at other times when they had finished the work in the book. One of the reflections Anna and Ester came up with when they had finished their project was that the work with the individual plan was not as individual as they had thought. They say: *The individual plan is the same for each child and they all work through all the different tasks. For some pupils it is hard, for others it is easy. We would like to change the plan so that each child has tasks adjusted to his or her ability level.*

For the autumn 1995 Anna and Ester planned to go to a serie of seminaris concerning laborative mathematics and to participate in a lecture by Henry Plucrose "Creative Matematics". They also joined a course in Montesori pedagogics given at the university. After their report they were convinced of developing their work with individual working plans for the pupils. They even discussed to get rid of the textbook in mathematics, which they thought governed them to much in their work. When I talked to them this february they told me how they had developed a material for laborative mathematics together with all the teachers at the primary level.

What happened to Karen´s development work?

In the autumn 1994 Karen was to teach in grade three the children she had earlier worked with. Karen and I discussed how to measure any success among the children. It was not possible to get a class to compare them with so we decided that her earlier experience of meeting grade three must be the measurement. Karen wrote a diary and made comparisons with earlier classes. Her conclusion was that none of the children had problems in threading a needle or followiing an instruction. Karen said the most positive result was that the children helped each other more than in other classes and that they could cooperate. Kare summarized her reflections over the development work with: I will not have to lower the ability level in the future, quite the contrary. In some activities I will have to raise the level.

When Karen finished her documentation we could read in the newspaper about a professor, in psychology, travelling to China studying young children in their way of eating with sticks and how this training will affect later development of finger-mobility (for example writing). Karen was very pleased to read about this and

decided to contact the researcher later-on. Karen´s development work made sense also in school. The teachers at the primary level wanted her to continue the work she had startedwith the youngest children and let it be a permanent part of the profile of the school.

The two example I have given throughout the text are development work that turned out to be school development. A big question here is how the teachers will go on with their work? In the last section I will briefly tell you about my continuing work with the same group of teachers and I will also raise some questions.

Educational research, in-service training, action research and then.....

I was lucky to get funded by the National Agency of Education to follow the group of teachers I worked with through the in-service training program (which was going on for two years). They were eight teachers from the same school, which made it even more interesting to follow the discussions in the school and to continue the work with Anna, Ester and Karen.

The teachers were very eager to let me come back to the school and were happy about my continuing interest for their school. My idea was now to turn our cooperation into action research with diary writing as a way of discussing their teaching practice. I presented diarywriting as a privat and personal way of reflection over what happened during the day or a way of focusing on a special child/special event. Together with the teachers I decided to discuss their diary writing in groups when I come back and visit the school once a month. The teachers decided to stay in their "own" teacher group which means one group consisted of three teachers at the primary level and the other of three teachers at the intermediate level. I invited all teachers at the school to start write diaries with group discussions but it was only the teachers who had joined the in-service training who accepted to continue the work with me. My part in the cooperation is to write my own diary from my observations of what happens in the staff room, carry out interviews and be a part in the diary discussions.

One of the first problems that appeared, which also lead me to my question, was the teachers lack of time. At my second visit none of the teachers had started

writing their diaries and none of the groups was able to find time to discuss their writings. The main reason for this was that the teachers, as they say, "don´t have the time for this kind of work". One of the teacher had a very interestingly comment, she said "if we take time from our unit discussions what will those do who do not write a diary?" here we notice a strong concern for equal treatment. This occasion made me think more about the teachers time outside teaching is organised into different discussion groups. The teachers say they are overwhelmed with organisational discussions and decisions that make them feel that there is no time for educational discussions.

Will action research be another burden for the teachers to bear? Or
Can action research help teachers understand how their working day is built up and put the educatinal question on the agenda?

References

Ely, Margot et al (1993). *Kvalitativ forskningsmetodik i praktiken - cirklar inom cirklar*. Lund: Studentlitteratur. (Doing Qualitative Research: Circles in Circles. Translated into Swedish)

Kallós, Daniel & Nilsson, Ingrid (1995). Defining and re-defining the teacher in the Swedeish comprehensive school. *Educational Review , 47*, 173-188.

Prop (1990). *Ansvaret för skolan*. Regeringens proposition 1990/91:18 (Government Bill presented to Parliment concerning the responsibility for the school. In Swedish)

Rönnerman, Karin (1993). *Lärare utvecklar sin praktik. En studie av åtta utvecklingsarbeten på lågstadiet*. (Teacher develop their practice. A study of eight development works on the primary level of the comprehensive school). (In Swedish with a summary in English). Umeå: Umeå univeristet, Pedagogiska institutionen.

Rönnerman, Karin (1995). Lärare forskar om sin praktik - reflektion över en försöksverksamhet i samarbete mellan några kommuner och pedagogiska institutionen. (Teacher research their own teaching practice - reflection over a cooperation between some municipalities and the department of education). (In Swedish). *Lärarutbildning och forskning i Umeå, 2*.

Rönnerman, Karin (1996). Relying on Teachers - A new Swedish in-service method for School Development. *British Lournal of In-service Education*. (in press)

Åsemar, Carl (1995).*Nyttjande av forskning genom lokala nätverk. Skolan och forskarna - öst är öst och väst är väst?* (The use of research through local network. East is east and west is west?). (In Swedish). Stockholm: Skolverket.